

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ILLAWARRA ENVIRONMENTAL HERITAGE COMMITTEE

Letter to the Editor, Illawarra Historical Society **Bulletin**.

Dear Editor,

I would like to comment on your article "Drug Addicts' Beach Hide Out to be Bulldozed", in the June issue of the Society's **Bulletin**.

Your concern for the preservation of Wollongong's historic buildings and places is one which I share, as do the other members of our Society. I understand too the sense of frustration you experienced about historic items already destroyed and those threatened by destruction.

But there are several matters raised in the article which require critical appraisal. And I must say at the outset that your criticisms of the Illawarra Environment Heritage Committee seem not to be based on the careful attention to facts you usually show. As one of the founding members of that group and still receiving its Minutes since departing the district, I can supply evidence for a very different record from the one you have published.

The Committee, since its inception over ten years ago, has consistently made recommendations to Council, and its members have campaigned, about the buildings you have listed, as well as many you did not mention. Sometimes the efforts failed or only partly succeeded. Sometimes there were triumphs.

The founding President, Alderman Bill Mowbray, who retired when he left the Wollongong Council in 1991, is a long-standing member of the Historical Society. Until prevented by illness, Jack Maynes was the official delegate from the Society to the Heritage Committee and there were others like myself, members both of the Society and the University. The Heritage Officer, Steve Dillon, is a member of the I.H.S. He has consistently supported the Museum in gaining grants from the State Government following recommendations from the Heritage Committee and endorsement of the Wollongong Council; he has also spent many hours in the preparation of the paper work needed in submitting the proposals on behalf of our Museum.

One of the successful campaigns for the preservation of local history has been Bulli's Black Diamond Heritage Committee (it came out of the Bulli Township Committee, itself a result of the destruction of Bulli's Primitive Methodist Chapel.) The Black Diamond group has the support of the Miners' Federation in its work, preserving the Bulli railway station, arranging the annual commemoration of the Bulli Mine Disaster, keeping an eye on the Miner's Cottage.

The Environment Heritage Committee supported the Bulli activities, including the failed attempt to prevent the bulldozing of the Primitive Methodist chapel. It gained the co-operation of the NSW Heritage body which initiated, and shared in the costs of, the purchase of the Miner's Cottage, as a symbol of Wollongong's mining background. "A white elephant?" That's an expression which does not belong in the vocabulary of true believers in local heritage.

The Illawarra Heritage Committee was divided on the matter of "Wyewurk" and its literary significance, as was our own Historical Society membership. But in the even more controversial matter of the preservation of the old Council Chambers and their use as the venue of the Art Gallery, it fully supported the campaign for the continued use of the whole complex, including the Town Hall.

This included the signing by all delegates of the petition to the Wollongong Council, authorised by the Presidents of the Historical Society, the Wollongong Family History Group and the Miners' Union.

It was the South Coast Labour Council which was divided on this issue, supporting those aldermen who believed that the buildings should be sold, to help ease the Council's financial difficulties. People like myself who proclaimed the historical and architectural value of the site, as well as the community's rights and needs for a well-housed art centre, were sometimes accused of being "academic" and "elitist". It was fortunate that this campaign resulted finally in the Wollongong Council's unanimous decision to put the art gallery in the old Council Chambers. The South Coast Labour Council was saved from being faced with an embarrassing choice of action about this piece of Wollongong history.

Who has the main responsibility for preserving the symbols of our traditions? It is the organisation of local government which has the ultimate power to save or destroy. True, the South Coast Labour Council can sometimes play a vital role in prevention. The Heritage Committee as a Committee of local government, on which are aldermen representative of the three Illawarra Councils, can make recommendations to the respective Councils. But success has been assured only when there has been widespread debate and lobbying by individuals and organisations in the community.

The Historical Societies and their members should be in the fore-front of activity about heritage matters, whenever possible attempting to influence and encourage other bodies and individuals of the same mind.